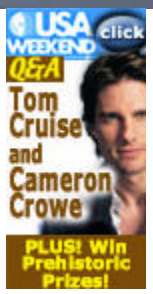
Foster's Sunday Citizen

News Menu
Fosters Home
N.H. State/Local
ME State/Local
Lakes Region
Back Issues
Sports
Business
Obituaries
Commentary
Today in History
Entertainment
Showcase
TV Listings
Movie Listings
Calendar
Nightlife
Special Sections
Autos
Online 2000
Homes
Dining
Health
Vital Statistics
Police Logs
Indictments
Licenses
Divorces
Community Info
Comm Weekly
School Lunches
Submit Forms
Subscribe
Engagement
Wedding
Services

Print to Web Ads: Waddell & Reed - Management Opportunity



Sunday, December 9, 2001

E-mail This Article

They’re gonna eat it up

HARRISON THORP

You may smell the freshly brewed coffee and fresh-baked pastry before you’ve even settled into your spacious, reclining coach seat that morning of your first ride aboard the Downeaster, the new passenger train between Portland and Boston.

By the time you’ve curled up comfortably at a window seat, a warm soft breath of air wafting up from the heat register beneath the window, the Downeaster will be gliding smoothly out of Dover en route to Boston.

Now, grab a paper — a Foster’s product of course — and see how fast, how pleasantly, how painless the trip to the Hub has become.

Between sipping the joe, munching a bagel, scanning the paper and enjoying your new perspective on the New Hampshire and Massachusetts landscape, the hour and 48 minutes it takes to get to Boston will go like a flash, I guarantee.

When you reach North Station, one of the city’s subway hubs, you’ll find yourself a short walk from Quincy Market, Faneuil Hall, Government Center, Downtown Crossing, the Museum of Science and the North End.

You’ll be a single subway ride on the Green Line from Park Street, the Theater District, the Prudential Center, the Public Garden, Copley Square, Symphony Hall, the shops on Newbury Street, Boston College, Kenmore Square (home of Fenway Park) Northeastern University, Boston University and the Museum of Fine Arts.

And you’ll be inside the Fleet Center, home of the Bruins and Celtics, who are both having a pretty good season so far.

In short, think of Boston as your new oyster and the train as your deep sea diver, gonna bring that oyster to you, baby.

After a day adventure in Beantown, on the way home enjoy a freshly grilled rosemary shrimp over crisp Caesar salad or some

Classified
Lotteries
Local Links
Biz Guide
Search
Site Info
Site Index
About Us
Feedback

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Legal Seafood award-winning clam chowder served onboard in the cafe car.

How about a cold beer, or a fruit and cheese nibbler with imported and domestic cheeses garnished with grapes and strawberries and served with crackers. A chilled glass of wine goes along nicely.

Now, after a lovely day in Boston, and a relaxing return trip ahead of you, your favorite beverage in one hand, perhaps a sliver of cheese in the other, nothing, you believe, nothing, could spoil your feeling of well-being, as your homebound train glides ever northward toward your home fires on a frosty December eve.

Except of course, unless, some train-hating lover of highway subsidies, car pollution and traffic reporters is on the train: "Well, Amtrak traveler, I see you’re enjoying suckling on the teat of American taxpayers, do you know that for every mile you travel, paying $26 a round trip, the average Joe has to fork over half of his paycheck in taxes. And his first-born.

"How does that make you feel. Don’t you realize Amtrak is a loser, it’s never made money and it was mandated to make a profit by 2002; it won’t. And yet they keep on spending, spending, bureaucratic, union-loving, featherbedding ne'er-do-wells from the get go, yep, that’s what they are.

And you sit there and sip your zinfandel, you ought to be ashamed."

Now, you feel the blood rushing to your head, but don’t be rash, don’t speak in haste. Have that last sip of wine, look him in the eye and say very slowly, very slowly so he can understand: "No national train system in the world makes money. They’re all nationalized, or heavily subsidized. It’s part of the transportation infrastructure. If the car makers and road builders hadn’t conspired in the ’30s and ’40s to destroy passenger rail so they could sell more cars and tires and build more roads, the rail beds and trackwork would never have fallen in such disrepair so that such an expensive upgrade would’ve been necessary to rehabilitate the tracks between Boston and Portland. The trains should never have been discontinued. But it was fast money — that’s still benefiting — the road builders and car makers.

Even now, the nation’s highways receive $30 billion a year in federal subsidies. Amtrak receives about 4 percent of the subsidies garnered by the nation’s airports, which helps defray airline costs.

But lets not dwell on money. How about pollution? If 320,000 passengers — the annual ridership projected for the Downeaster its first year — take the train, how many polluting cars is that off the road? I’ll tell you how many: it’s in the hundreds of thousands; and that’s reducing pollution a lot.

And have you been into Boston lately. Probably not, because who can stand:

- The traffic on the Mystic Tobin (to go to the Fleet) or the

Central Artery (to go to the aquarium) or Storrow Drive (for a Red Sox game). Not many.

- or the smell: too many polluting cars. Not many.

Then finish up by telling him that taking the train is just plain fun, an event in itself, that transcends any other mode of travel. And you enjoy it. Then bade him good night.

You’re in Dover, time to get off.

See how fast that trip was?

Harrison Thorp can be reached by calling 742-4455, ext 5391, or by e-mail at hthorp@fosters.com